

Submission to the LGAT Amalgamation Review/Sorell and Tasman Municipalities.

I have tried to address the questions raised in the Discussion Paper. I do not write on behalf of any particular organisation.

3.1 No change

What opportunities and challenges do the projected population changes in Tasman and Sorell municipalities present if they remain separate?

The slow population growth in Tasman municipality may in part be correlated with the difficulty in obtaining employment in the municipality. Unless local jobs are available permanent residents seeking work must either commute, resort to other means of support, or move to a place where there are jobs. Some commute to Sorell to work, and vice versa so one municipality's loss is another's gain. What is not clear to me without going back to the original Census data is what percentages of employment in both Sorell and Tasman are in Hobart. Traffic increase to Sorell from Hobart indicates that Sorell is already becoming a commuter suburb of Hobart. How much of the employed workforce is employed within Sorell, and within Tasman?

While I would strongly urge the continued employment of Tasman Council staff post-amalgamation, the question is whether the Tasman local government workforce will be working on Tasman Peninsula, or would they be required to commute to Dunalloy or even to Sorell. Either way the employment would be part of the enlarged Sorell Municipality, and there could be a population decline on Tasman Peninsula as staff decide to relocate to Sorell to live, rather than face a 60 minute commute.

One benefit of a low population where there is a strong but small network of permanent residents, is that the rate of crime is also low, but this is a geographical factor, and I cannot see how any of the proposed options for change would affect this one way or another.

The projected increase in the median ages of the Tasman population is already a concern to organisations which call on volunteers for their operations. Part of this is attitudinal and financial, as younger residents have to or want to work in paid employment, but most of the problem is that current volunteers are ageing and are not being replaced by a younger cohort. Some of those receiving benefits of various kinds from both State and Federal Governments do not seem to think there is any obligation on them to give back to the community that supports them, although a few do offer voluntary work as part of their obligations through Centrelink.

There appears to be a small increase in the number of older people moving to Tasmania, using lower house prices as an opportunity to downsize; and free up funds by purchasing cheaper houses here, and to escape the increasing heat on the mainland. This is also happening in Tasman, and while these people are not in the employment market, and they contribute to the predicted higher median age, their presence will over time generate employment opportunities in aged care, and in providing services to those who require assistance to remain in their home. I have seen this already.

How do you think the Council's rating levels will be affected if they remain as stand-alone Councils?

Tasman Council has for some years increased the rate by the inflation rate (or possibly the CPI, I'm not sure which) and charged a minimum rate for all blocks. With a large number of holiday homes in the area, the rates on individual properties can only increase otherwise if property values rise. At present when homes are sold, the new owners seem to refurbish, extend or generally improve them, so the rateable values increase, gradually increasing the rate base. So it is possible that increased revenue will lead to improvements for Tasman ratepayers without an increase in the formula used to calculate the rating level. I cannot see that the rate would ever fall.

Of more concern to me is the surplus which Tasman Council has in hand. Should amalgamation proceed would the Tasman Council reimburse ratepayers proportionate to their share of this surplus?

If not do they have plans to carry out major projects to spend the funds before amalgamation, or will the funds go into the amalgamated Council coffers. If the latter, Tasman residents would expect those funds to be spent in Tasman and Forestier peninsulas.

What future opportunities and risks are there to the services ratepayers and residents can expect to receive if the councils remain stand-alone Councils?

I had not realised how few services are provided directly by Tasman Council staff until I read the discussion on this topic. I assume though, that those they don't deliver are outsourced to other councils for a fee or cost-shared with Sorell and/or other councils. For example health services are not provided by Council, but delivered by Huon Regional Care. Tasman Council provides very little in the way of cultural services, and I assume this would not change. Water services are provided by Southern Water, but the majority of homes collect and use tank water. Presumably Council has a backup source of water for purchase during drought times. Most people use commercial water tankers when their tanks are empty. At present the most obvious services boil down to roads (and bridges) and rubbish. They also manage a number of affordable housing units near the local Health and Community Service. One foreshadowed service is the construction of more affordable housing, but I assume this will be using Federal and State funds rather than Council's.

The major risk is that so much of the Council's revenue is spent on road and bridge maintenance. This covers a large geographical area, many of the roads are unsealed, and many of the bridges are due for replacement. Current practice appears to be to fill potholes, and patch with light seal until the road completely breaks down and requires major work. Whether the increases in rates revenue will be sufficient to cover this work is questionable. While the State Government will eventually fund work on roads such as the Arthur Highway, minor roads are at risk. An emphasis on maintenance of tourist routes does benefit ratepayers too, but at present very few roads are upgraded from gravel each year or foreshadowed work is not carried out, for reasons unknown. An example of this is Nubeena Back Road, which was listed a few years ago for sealing a section each year until complete. Nothing has happened other than re-grading.

Because there is no bus service to speak of (unless you plan to go out in the morning and return at night) residents of Tasman Peninsula rely on their cars being in good condition to take on 3 or more hours of commuting to and from Hobart or Sorell, let alone around the municipality. Hence their obsession with the poor condition of roads and the damage this does to their vehicles.

What does local representation mean to you in the context of the quality of services you expect?

At present Tasman has 7 council representatives. And for the number of people living in Tasman (let alone the shack owners) this provides a fair opportunity for discussion/advice/consultation with their ratepayers. Council used to hold community consultation meetings at several locations on the Peninsula, but these have apparently fallen by the wayside. These are more likely to be attended when there seems to be some sort of crisis than at "normal" times. More effective is the monthly reports and Council News published in the *Tasman Gazette*. These are good in informing the public about what is being done with their rates.

As to how local representation affects the quality of services, Tasman and Sorell have shared a General Manager for some time now, and I think he has a fair idea now of what services Tasman can expect for their dollar, compared to Sorell. And while General Managers are obliged to reflect the wishes of Councillors, I suspect the flow of ideas and what they would cost is often in the other direction.

3.2 Further resource sharing options

Are there any services not presently provided that might be possible if they were provided on a cost-sharing basis?

A major need is kerb and gutters along roadsides where there are currently no footpaths so that people can at least move off the road when cars pass them by. Footpaths would be even better. Is this a candidate for sharing costs?

3.3 Merger of Tasman and Sorell Councils

What would be the ideal level of representation in a merged Council? Which parts of a merged council area should be elected members be drawn from?

Under an amalgamated Council a mechanism would need to be developed to provide opportunities for direct discussion with the people affected by Council decisions or plans. When Cygnet was amalgamated with Huon Council many years ago now, a local committee was established to provide Cygnet ratepayers with a voice to Council. As a ratepayer living in Huonville, I resented this since there was no similar committee to represent the interests of the people of Huonville, or Geeveston or Franklin or Dover and surrounds, so we had to rely on Council to be fair, and not affected unduly by the squeaky wheel.

Reintroducing a ward system based on equal numbers of ratepayers in each ward, as a transitional arrangement could be a way to gradually build the confidence of ratepayers in the fairness of the provision of services by an amalgamated council. But there should be a sunset clause to phase them out for the election subsequent to the first under the ward system. There are probably ratepayers who have properties in both Sorell and Tasman municipalities, and their views on the comparative performance of those councils would be interesting to hear.

I think 11 councillors would be sufficient to serve the combined municipalities. Under a ward system, using 2015/16 population figures this would accommodate two from Tasman and Forestier Peninsulas, one overlapping between Forestier Peninsula and part of Sorell Municipality and the remainder in Sorell Municipality.

What are the opportunities and challenges in terms of rating levels and rate base under a merged council option?

Since the separate councils have different methods of calculating rates this could well be contentious. Assuming property values are less in Tasman than in Sorell, a switch to this as the basis for rates could result in a reduction in Tasman rates compared to Sorell rates at present. While the proposal for amalgamation is intended to reduce costs once the transition period has been worked through, the modelling to be carried out by the Local Government Board could go a long way in persuading all ratepayers that they will be no worse off in terms of their hip pockets. The offset would have to be an improvement in services, delivered by any mechanism appropriate.

What specific transitional issues should the board consider in respect to a potential merger option?

The first question many people in Tasman would ask is what will happen to the jobs of the works crew, the weeds management officer and the like. They work on local projects, although their skills are transferable to another location, but there would appear to be no reason why local jobs like those should be based in Sorell.

One must assume that "front of house" positions would reduce when we change from two to one Council office. I can see no reason why there would continue to be two Council offices. Tasman ratepayers can make all their contacts either through bill payment systems at the Post Office, local bank etc. and by telephone, email or letter. There is no particular need to visit the Council Chambers unless to speak personally with the mayor or general manager and this can just as easily be done in Sorell as Nubeena.

Critical would be to communicate with the ratepayers at every step of the way. Nothing breeds rumour and discontent like ignorance of the facts, and even when these are published and broadcast, there are still people who will talk amongst themselves on the basis of their assumptions rather than fact.

At present there are a number of community halls which are run by local committees, raising funds for maintenance of those halls. When Tasman Council tried to close some of these down some years ago, there was outrage, since those halls had been constructed by their communities, who felt there

was still a need for them. The same pertains today, and this would have to be handled with great sensitivity.

Finally, I cannot see any justification for moving the Council Chambers in Sorell close to Tasman. It should be located at the centre of the most densely populated area and that would still be Sorell. Nor does there need to be a local office in Tasman.

At present the Tasman Community Op Shop and Library occupies premises in Nubeena, extended in the last few years using funds from the Op Shop and Council, and which it rents from Tasman Council for a nominal sum of \$1. It provides a valuable service to the community, providing goods and edibles at low prices, and giving back to the community the profit it raises by this means. It also services a valuable service by giving locals and visitors a means to dispose of items in good condition saving them from going to landfill. Any move to charge rates, or increase this rental would not be well received. Perhaps a check on how similar shops are accommodated in Sorell would be useful.

There are several recreation grounds in Tasman, and an audit of their usage could also be revealing. Would local clubs fail if there was no longer local access to a ground? Do facilities have to be provided on an equal footing to other grounds in a combined municipality.

Similarly there are local cemeteries in Tasman, many of them with long histories, which locals would like to see maintained, and continued in use until they reach capacity. This too could create a problem unless locals can be reassured.

Prepared and submitted by Mrs Beverley (Bev) Ewins